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Rings for the rainbow family: religious opposition to the introduction of same-sex marriage in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

When Sweden introduced same-sex marriage in 2009, this change in legislation was preceded by a well-organized, professional campaign of an alliance of various religious leaders. Since political support for a gender neutral marriage law was substantial and public opinion in favor, the question that is raised in this article is: what was at stake for the Christian opposition in its defiance of same-sex marriage? It is argued that through their “Protect Marriage” initiative, the marginal “free churches” confidently claimed a space for themselves in the Church of Sweden dominated religious landscape and the liberal values dominated political landscape. Paradoxically, it was precisely the overwhelmingly mocking, derogatory responses to the campaign which allowed conservative Christians to firmly position themselves in the debate.

KEYWORDS

Christianity; Church of Sweden; evangelicalism; homosexuality; same-sex marriage; Sweden

Over the past 15 years, the number of countries that have adopted gender neutral marriage legislation¹ has grown rapidly in Europe. Since the Netherlands set the example in 2001, 13 countries have introduced same-sex marriage. Prior to the opening up of marriage to same-sex couples, numerous countries, starting with Denmark in 1989, had introduced some form of registered partnership for these couples. However, marriage seems to be increasingly replacing registered partnership as the “instrument of recognition” of gay and lesbian rights in Europe.² The introduction of “gay marriage” does not go uncontested, and religious actors are often at the core of the opposition. In Spain (which introduced same-sex marriage in 2005), many Roman Catholic bishops strongly opposed the opening up of marriage to same-sex couples through public statements.³ In 2012 (one year prior to the introduction of same-sex marriage), over 100,000 people joined a protest march in France organized by a number of Roman Catholic organizations. The Christian Democratic Union of Germany has for years been blocking the introduction of same-sex marriage. Likewise, when in Sweden, the country of focus in this article, the political process toward the introduction of same-sex marriage was moving toward its completion, religious groups and individuals, like in other European countries,

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started to voice their opposition. When the new law was introduced in 2009, Sweden would have witnessed a well-organized campaign in which various Christian denominations and various religious actors and individuals formed an alliance of resistance that surprised many in its outspokenness and professionalism.

The recurring religious opposition to same-sex marriage, in particular in countries characterized by their extremely low numbers of church attendance like Sweden, sometimes in combination with a rigid separation between church and state such as France, fits into the understanding of the occurrence of a “de-privatization” of religion in Europe.⁴ The growing presence of religion in the public sphere seems to be negotiated more than anything through debates on the regulation of sexuality. Indeed, Linda Woodhead has argued that while less people are religious, those who remain faithful are becoming more restrictive on issues of sexuality. According to Woodhead, underlying the clash between a more permissive attitude on sexuality and conservative Christian morals is a cultural shift best defined, following Charles Taylor, as the post-1960s “subjective turn”, in which

traditional values of duty and deference give way to new values of authenticity and expressivism. Rather than relying on external authority as a guide for identity and action, an increasing number of men and women in affluent democracies have come to rely on inner convictions, emotions, and intuitions as the authentic source of wisdom in the living of life.⁵

While in many European countries religious positions have become minority positions, then, they simultaneously seem to become more outspoken and “choose” sexuality as their topic of concern.

There are a number of observations about religious (mostly Christian) opposition to same-sex marriage in particular which deserve further exploration. The first is that there is something paradoxical about it. In conservative Christian argumentation – and I will expand on this below in the case study of Sweden – marriage is often understood as an institute closely tied to faith and religious ritual. The fact that its popularity increases, at the very least as an “object of emancipation” in times when divorce rates also increase and the position of religion in the public sphere is an ongoing source for tension, could also have been welcomed as an opportunity for the strengthening of religious ritual in a secularized society. Obviously, from a conservative Christian perspective marriage may have “core characteristics” which *a priori* exclude same-sex couples, such as the raising of children whose (only) biological parents are the married couple. However, marriage perpetuates and amplifies a number of values central to traditional Christian thought, such as the importance of stable, sustainable, monogamous relationships. Extending the range of people who are allowed to be married might also be a way to bring these values into the limelight. The second observation is that, Christian opposition to same-sex marriage has often shown to be futile. Christians have been signing petitions, writing letters to newspaper editors and taken to the streets in vain: once the political support has been secured, the introduction of same-sex marriage is a foregone case and political parties quickly learn that it often is more expedient to vote in favor. The knock-on effect of countries rapidly following each other’s example in adjusting their marriage legislation over the past 15 years should be a sign of what is to come for all these protesters. Yet the energy with which marriage was defended as an institution for opposite-sex couples is impressive.

Based on both the fact that there might be an overlooked positive overlap between same-sex marriage and traditional Christian values and aims, and the fact that protests seldom generate any actual political effect, the question arises: what is at stake for religious actors protesting against same-sex marriage? Woodhead understands the public positioning through the voicing of a certain sexual ethics as a means to preserve and demarcate a distinct Christian identity in a world that is changing rapidly.⁶ However, in debates on same-sex marriage in Canada (introduced in 2005) Christian participants, especially in consultations by the government, did not frame their objections in religious, but rather in “scientific” or “universal” terms, evoking arguments of biology, history and sociology rather than Biblical argumentation.⁷ In this, they comply with Jürgen Habermas’ statement that religious argumentation can only be present in the public sphere if it is willing to be treated as an “opinion” and follow the rules of rational argumentation.⁸ However, though Christian engagement in this sense may lead to a demarcation of a distinct Christian identity with an appeal to secular argumentation, one might wonder whether it is in fact a particular *Christian* identity that is thus constructed, or a form of secular religion. Or perhaps the lines between the secular and the religious are not so easily drawn.

In this article, I will explore the particularities of debates on same-sex marriage in Sweden, focusing on the construction of religious opposition and the public reception of this opposition. The aim of this article is to get a closer understanding of the ways in which religion, (homo)sexuality and marriage have been constructed in relation to each other, and what the stakes were for various actors to relate these concepts to each other in a particular way. I hope to gain more insight into what these debates reveal about what counts as religion in Sweden, and how consequently the parameters for the position of religion in the public sphere are being negotiated.

Below, I will first give a brief overview on recent developments regarding the acceptance of homosexuality in Swedish society, the Church of Sweden and the minority “free churches”. I will then turn to my material and expand on the applied methodology, followed by a section on the actions and discourses by the alliance that opposed same-sex marriage. After discussing the responses to this alliance, I will come to a conclusion.

Homosexuality in (the Church of) Sweden

The social climate of Sweden can be characterized as one in which sexual diversity is relatively widely accepted. In 1995 the country introduced registered partnership for same-sex couples, the third country in the world to do so after Denmark (1989) and Norway (1993). The non-traditional *regnbågsfamilj*, the “rainbow family” consisting of same-sex couples and their children, found its way to Sweden’s “fifth gospel”: the IKEA catalogue. Moreover, in Sweden queer issues seem to be on the agenda of LGBT lobby groups more than in any other European country, while queer theory is being developed at several Swedish universities, notably by scholars like Tiina Rosenberg and Don Kulick. The queering of the Swedish LGBT lobby has resulted in gender norms and trans*⁹ issues being put explicitly on the agenda¹⁰ and, some argue, also to the mainstreaming and therefore depoliticization of the concept of queer.¹¹ Queer lobbying, however, does pay off, as it is translated into the way in which emancipation issues are taken up, for example, in the 2009 Law on Gender Identity and Gender Expression, which forbids the discrimination of “persons who exceed

gender norms". In a climate where traditional gender roles can be questioned and the expression of non-normative gender roles is protected, the adjustment of the institution of marriage outside the traditional boundaries of male-female relationships can easily be imagined to be both mistrusted (for the re-inscription of heterosexual norms) and cheered for (as a marker of social acceptance). While the gay and lesbian lobby in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries initially was critical toward the traditional institution of marriage, they later "de-radicalized" and adopted a legal rights discourse which emphasized equal rights for same-sex couples.¹² Governmental support for same-sex marriage was substantial: of the seven political parties, six voted in favor while only one, the Christian Democrats, voted against.

The resistance of the Christian Democrat party poses the question of how religion and homosexuality have been relating to each other in Sweden more generally. The nation's religious landscape has been dominated by the Lutheran Church of Sweden, which was the country's state church until the year 2000. The religious composition of Sweden has been described in terms of *cultural religion*, "a way of being religiously connected without being religiously active"¹³ or, by Grace Davie, as *vicarious religion*: people seem not to want to get involved in church activities on a regular basis, but do value the presence and availability of priests and deacons to perform life rituals.¹⁴ Either way, the "Swedish paradox"¹⁵ of low church attendance combined with high rates of church memberships does not imply that the Church of Sweden has become a marginal institution. With around 25,000 employees it is considerable in size and it touches upon people's lives at formative moments, perhaps most of all marriage.¹⁶

Homosexuality has been on the official agenda of the Church of Sweden since 1974, when a semi-official church report titled *De homosexuella och kyrkan* ("Homosexuals and the Church") was published.¹⁷ The report sought to come to an understanding of homosexuality as a phenomenon and made some initial suggestions for the blessing of same-sex relationships. These blessings were to be carried out in a pastoral context, by a priest and without the presence of friends and family members. There would be two decades of silence on the topic until homosexuality became a topic of public debate when in the year 1995 civil partnership for same-sex couples was introduced. Other than in, for instance, the Netherlands, where civil partnership was open to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples and where partnership in fact would become more popular among the latter group, in Sweden civil partnership would be directed at, and exclusively open to, same-sex couples.¹⁸ The introduction of the partnership law, legitimizing same-sex relationships at the state level and symbolically recognizing them at the social level, while simultaneously being a new alternative to the familiar social and ecclesial marriage laws and rites, urged the Church of Sweden to reconsider its policies on and practices related to the blessing of same-sex relationships. Anticipating the new law a new report was issued in 1994: *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten* ("The Church and Homosexuality").¹⁹ A careful reader will note the subtle shift in focus from homosexuality in 1974 to the church in 1994 in the report titles. The report stated that same-sex relationships and the new law on civil partnership should be accepted and supported by the church, but that the church should simultaneously uphold what was seen by the authors as a basic difference between partnership and marriage. In 1995 the Bishop's Conference published a document of "Pastoral Guidelines" for the blessing of civil partnership, which was still to be conducted in the private context of the pastoral setting, and not a

public event in the church building. In 1999 these guidelines were revised to enable the blessing to become a more public event, though still not as formal as church weddings. In the years to follow homosexuality would be a recurring theme at various Bishop's Conferences, and in 2006 an official rite for the blessing of registered partnerships was introduced. At that time, the social debate had already moved on toward the introduction of same-sex marriage. In 2007 jurist Hans Regner, who was appointed by the government to explore the possibilities of and social views on same-sex marriage, handed in his "one man commission", advising the government to introduce a gender-neutral marriage law.²⁰ In the public debate that accompanied the political decision-making process, an important issue was the *vigselrätt*, the right to solemnize marriages, by religious institutions. In Sweden couples may opt for a civil wedding only, but many prefer their wedding to be performed by a church official. In Sweden, a marriage sanctioned in church is a legal marriage, and there is no need for the interference of a civil servant. Other than in the Netherlands, the context discussed by David Bos and Marco Derks in this issue, couples do not have a civil wedding which is at a later moment blessed in church (and which in fact is required before any church representative may perform the blessing). Once the law on same-sex marriage was effectuated, many wondered what would happen to church denominations or religious individuals who refused to conduct same-sex weddings. The Church of Sweden, then, faced two questions: would the church bless same-sex marriages? And, second, would it want to maintain its *vigselrätt*? In 2009, it was decided by the General Assembly (by a two-thirds majority) that the church would solemnize same-sex marriages, and consequently that it would maintain its right to perform weddings. Priests with consciousness objections would not be requested to perform the rites, provided that all congregations would guarantee that the marriage could take place.

There was, within the church, resistance to the solemnization of same-sex marriage. Under the guidance of priest Yngve Kalin, who became a public figure, no less than 864 priests had in 2005 signed a letter in which they rejected same-sex marriage.²¹ Besides objections from this substantial minority within the Church of Sweden, religious rejections of same-sex marriage was voiced by the so-called "free churches", minority denominations like the Evangelical, Pentecostal, Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Muslim and Jewish religious communities are also counted as free churches. The free churches run about 100 "confessional" schools, mostly with a Christian signature while a minority (10 schools) are founded on Muslim principles, in an education system which otherwise aims as much as possible at "equality" and unity of schools.²² The question of how an adjustment of marriage rights would influence marriage rites was very crucial to these minority denominations, since most of them had *vigselrätt* but, since they for the larger part rejected same-sex marriage, anticipated that they would lose this right to solemnize marriages once same-sex marriage was effectuated. Located on the edges of the Swedish religious landscape, in the debate on same-sex marriage these marginal Christian denominations and minority religions became much more outspoken than many Swedes were accustomed to. In the run-up to the introduction of same-sex marriage, many authoritative figures of the "free churches" formed alliances with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church as well as conservative members or clergy from the Church of Sweden and Muslim and Jewish communities, in order to organize opposition. They united in an initiative called *Bevara äktenskapet* (Protect Marriage [PM]). Since the

opposition was well-organized and could launch its arguments in a prepared and well thought through manner, its argumentation became the point of departure for the further debate.²³ Their well-organized protests caused many to reconsider the position of conservative minorities in Swedish public debate and public space, and urged the majority to relate to views that diverge from what in Sweden is considered to be common good. The discourse of PM as well as its reception in the written media, forms the main focus of this article.

Material and method

The material on which the analysis is based consists, first, of several written documents which form the intellectual basis of the PM initiative. Prior to the PM campaign, in 2004, the book *Försvara äktenskapet: en intervjubok om familjens status, roll och framtid* ("Defend Marriage: an interview book on the status, role and future of the family") was published, edited by journalist and Pentecostal pastor Olof Djurfeldt.²⁴ Next to the book, the PM material includes the official 4-page brochure with which the campaign was launched.

Second, the material consists of all articles addressing the PM initiative published in the written media in Sweden in the years 2006 and 2007. While the debate on same-sex marriage was in fact more extended, for the scope of this article the material is thus confined to either the voicing of (religious) opposition to same-sex marriage, or the discussion of this opposition by secular media. In total, 128 articles were included in the analysis. The articles were obtained from the press archive of *Riksförbundet för homosexuellas, bisexuellas, transpersoners och queeras rättigheter* (RFSL), the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights, which keeps track of all news items related to homosexuality and trans* issues in Sweden.

Following the approach of Ralph Smith and Russell Windes²⁵ in their research on progay and antigay discourses, I apply the conceptual frame for the study of media discourse proposed by William Gamson and Andre Modigliani.²⁶ They view policy issues as "a symbolic contest over which interpretation will prevail".²⁷ In this contest, several *interpretative packages* compete for the dominant interpretation of policy issues. Interpretative packages consist of the collective of "metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices" that are characteristic of a certain discourse.²⁸ Packages are dispersed via various channels, the media being one of them and perhaps today, when online media are prominent, even a more important one than in the time frame when Gamson and Modigliani developed their theory. *Media packages*, then, are the clusters of interpretative packages visible in the media through which the process of sense-making and meaning-making in relation to a certain policy issue takes place. Underlying the package is a *frame*, a "range of positions, rather than any single one, allowing for a degree of controversy among those who share a common frame".²⁹ What makes the concept of the frame interesting, then, is that it does not necessarily imply a clear, unified stance in favor or against a certain measure. The frame does denote an organizing principle, but this does not have to coincide with the eventual stance that is taken toward a certain issue. Frames can be built up of, and often are, varying and sometimes even contradicting interpretative packages.³⁰ Packages are not stable and fixed, but change shape over time. Depending on relevant events that happen, packages have "careers", meaning that

they interact with changes in society.³¹ Finally, packages can be more or less successful, depending on their ability to resonate with other cultural interests and the efforts of their “sponsors”. With the latter Gamson and Modigliani mean not just advocacy, but basically any actor (e.g. organization or authoritative individual) who is willing to contribute to the success of the “package career”, that is, its impact on the issue at hand.³²

What makes the media discourse framework of Gamson and Modigliani particularly useful for this study is, first, that it allows for changes in discourses to be traced. As the PM campaign lasted for at least a year the campaign itself consisted of several formative events, while there were other events, for instance, in the response to the campaign, which also impacted the discourse and allowed the campaign leaders to adjust the strategy. Second, in allowing dissonance between the various arguments that make up the “package” the theory allows for the tracing of contesting meanings produced within both the campaign and the response. Focusing on the underlying frame, third, makes it possible to explore underlying motives and stakes, rather than “merely” why certain actors defended or opposed same-sex marriage. Finally, the media discourse theory proposed here allows for the possibility that some components of the “pro” package may actually be in tune with some elements of the “con” package (cultural resonance), and therefore creates the option to investigate where discourses that are generally understood to be completely oppositional may in fact converge.

The PM initiative

For the scope of this article I am mainly interested in the way in which PM presented itself in public debate. The “packages” created there, however, have roots in previous initiatives where the contours of the alliance became clear and the underlying motivation for the campaign was formulated. I therefore briefly discuss some material which was published (and therefore public), but in my opinion mostly directed at the inner circle of fellow believers. This is the aforementioned book, edited by journalist Olof Djurfeldt, *Defend Marriage* (2004). Many of its writers or those who contributed through interviews would later join the public campaign. The book is published by the Pentecostal community and therefore a free church initiative. Published shortly after Hans Regner was given the assignment to investigate the support for same-sex marriage, it anticipates the political deliberation over the introduction of same-sex marriage and aims to provide “tools to understand the risks of gender neutral marriage”.³³ This article does not leave room for a thorough discussion of all the arguments presented in the book, and at this moment I would mainly like to address the context from which several arguments are taken and how these contexts function to uplift the book from what might be perceived as a narrow Pentecostal perspective in order to constitute the argumentation as interreligious, secular/neutral and international.

First, Djurfeldt explains how the argumentation against gender neutral marriage transcends religious dividing lines. The book, therefore, includes interviews with (among others) Roman Catholic bishop Anders Arborelius, orthodox rabbi Meir Horden and Salvation Army officer Rolf Roos. Other chapters include a systematic theological perspective (Agne Nordlander, Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsen) and an apologetic perspective (Stefan Gustavsson, general secretary of the Svenska Evangeliska Allians.). Second, in the book it is made clear that same-sex marriage might also be opposed from a non-

religious perspective. In order to sketch the worrisome developments to which the book wants to respond, Djurfeldt, in his introductory chapter, cites opinion pieces from secular daily newspapers. They include a column in *Metro* where it is suggested that marriage be replaced by temporary contracts and an opinion piece from the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* where it is argued that the weakening of marriage is a universal phenomenon based on an increase of individualism and freedom of choice. "It is therefore", Djurfeldt concludes, "not just believing Christians who consider marriage to be a sacred union who realize what is at stake. We risk our future if we continue the free experiment with family forms".³⁴ The book further includes chapters with expert opinions by cultural anthropologist Jan-Åke Alvarsson, religion and church historian Per Beskow, lawyer Per Karlsson and pediatrician Anna Aronsson. Third, the book states that the Swedish movement against same-sex marriage will work in close cooperation with like-minded groups abroad. One of the chapters is dedicated to the lobbying work of Care, a British Evangelical organization for opinion making and family support.

Many of the "sponsors" of the publication *Defend Marriage* would also become key figures in the PM campaign. The "sponsors" of the interpretative package against same-sex marriage are very diverse and indeed show how the argumentation is supported by a wide range of religious and secular opponents. What is missing here, however, is a sponsor who represents what in the eyes of many Swedes might be expected to be a more important player in the debate over marriage: the Church of Sweden. Without a representative from the religious institution which is, by far, the largest in Sweden, one could wonder whether the "career" of the campaign would be successful.

In anticipation of Regner's report on gender neutral marriage in March 2007, the PM campaign was launched in February 2006, granting the initiative one year to influence policy in such a way as to preserve marriage for opposite-sex couples. The initiative's argumentation was explained in a four page brochure entitled *En man & en kvinna: Fakta och argument för att bevara äktenskapet som en förening mellan en man och en kvinna* ["One man and one woman: Facts and arguments to preserve marriage as a union between one man and one woman"].³⁵ As founders of the initiative the names of Catholic bishop Anders Arborelius, Pentecostal pastor Sten-Gunnar Hedin and general secretary of the Svenska Evangeliska Alliansen Stefan Gustavsson are mentioned. The brochure further included the option to sign the PM petition and included the names of authoritative figures who had already done so. The petition was to run until August 2006 and then to be handed to the prime minister. It could also be signed online on the website the initiative launched, www.bevaraaktenskapet.nu. The website still exists, but now contains suggestions on how to improve your marriage, a link to a jeweler that will buy your wedding band should those suggestions come too late, and a clear statement that marriage is for everyone regardless of sex – the website obviously is no longer in the hands of PM. Eventually over 50,000 Swedish citizens (0.7% of the population) would sign the petition.

While some of the earlier argumentation of the *Defend Marriage* publication is repeated, often in a more succinct manner, there are also some new arguments and emphases. Also, there have been some interesting developments in regards to the "sponsors" of the initiative. To begin with the argumentation: different kinds of arguments are presented, based on terminology, history, culture, biology and children's rights. Many of these arguments are well-known to those familiar with debates on same-sex marriage: marriage is presented as an institution with historical roots, as the only or best place to

procreate and raise children, and as a practice that transcends cultural boundaries. US Evangelical rhetoric resonates in the argument that the opening up of marriage to same-sex couples may lead to a further “degeneration” of marriage to, for instance, polyamory (the “slippery slope” argument). There are, however, two interesting lines of argumentation which I would argue are quite specific for the PM initiative.

The first is a strong emphasis on marriage as a term or concept. As such, it should be reserved for the relationship between a man and a woman:

Try to imagine the confusion when “bank” suddenly became a word used for all stores, or “trousers” for all clothes. [...] Why not call things by their right name: “marriage” for the union between man and woman, and “partnership” for same-sex couples?³⁶

What is interesting about this argument, is the implication that same-sex unions as *such* are not questioned or criticized by PM, but accepted as a matter of fact. An underlying assumption, moreover, is that “marriage” in fact refers to an unchanging reality “out there” which the term adequately describes, an adequacy which would get lost once the term was used for other forms of relationships. This brings us to the second interesting feature of PM argumentation: the understanding of the relationship between marriage and gender. According to PM, marriage is “not just a union between two persons, but between two sexes”.³⁷ Children (perhaps the most basic feature of PM argumentation) are best raised by people of two different genders. It is for good reason, PM cleverly adds, that in Sweden policies are developed to secure an equal gender balance in schools and ensure that children have both male and female teachers. This argument is clever, because it anticipates a tension which is necessarily part of Sweden’s widely accepted *jämställdhet* (gender equality) ideology: a tension between stressing sexual difference and the added value of an equal division of women and men in all layers of society on the one hand, and the downgrading of gender in order to counter traditional gender complementarity on the other. Proponents of same-sex marriage in their response will have to choose between either rejecting sexual difference as a fundamental aspect of marriage (but then what to do about gender complementarity as a central aspect of general emancipation ideology?) or holding on to sexual difference as important (but that strengthens PM’s argument for having partners of opposite sexes raising children).

While in the brochure PM extensively argues what marriage is, it reveals almost nothing about its views on homosexuality. Same-sex relationships are seen as distinctly “other” than heterosexual relationships, but exactly what it is that makes them so different is not made explicit. Same-sex relationships are mostly defined by what they are *not*: a biological precondition for procreation, or a complementary relationship which finds its expression mostly in the difference between the mother and the father role—though what these roles consists of is not spelled out.

Surprisingly, as also noted by Axner,³⁸ religion is not used in any of PM’s argumentation related to same-sex marriage as such: the brochure contains no Biblical references or arguments based on Christian tradition. Christianity does become important when the ritual dimension of marriage and the role of the churches in this ritual is concerned. Striking here is the strong relationship that is being constructed between marriage, religion, and Swedish culture. The church’s right to perform marriages, it is argued, is something to preserve as a part of Swedish culture with which “political rulers” should not interfere. In the document religion, like marriage, is something in need of protection. Same-sex marriage might be used to limit

religious freedom in Sweden: “Will it become a criminal offence to publically or in the context of an organization or church community hold on to a classical definition of marriage?”³⁹

In regards to “sponsors”, one might argue that PM made some important progress in pursuing the “career” of the interpretative package of the initiative. The first is that the initiative now succeeded in including representatives from the Church of Sweden, and they are named prominently in the brochure among the 33 prominent subscribers: archbishop emeritus Gunnar Weman, archbishop emeritus Bertil Werkström and “Oas-inspiratör” Berit Simonsson – Oas (oasis) is a charismatic revival movement within the Church of Sweden. While most of the others who signed the petition at this stage are the “usual suspects” from some of the evangelical and charismatic denominations, a few stand out as quite unexpected allies, for instance, professional boxer Paolo Roberto, professional soccer player Abgar Barsom, feminist theologian Inga-Mårta Isaksson and Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, the wife of Carl Bildt, then party leader of the Moderate Party who at that time were very much split over the issue of gender neutral marriage legislation. At a later stage, to the surprise of many, leftist author, debater and self-proclaimed atheist Jan Myrdal would join the campaign. Based on this list of “sponsors” as well as the chosen argumentation it seems as though the PM campaign had the potential to convince larger audiences than the book *Defend Marriage* had. The argumentation was religious only in so far as it addressed the freedom of religion and expression, values which might be expected to be shared widely among the audience. Moreover, they had now succeeded in including representatives from the Church of Sweden. Though these were retired church leaders at the moment the campaign was launched (and, therefore, could have been considered as “old-fashioned”), and though K.G. Hammar, who was archbishop during the same-sex marriage debates, had been careful not to take any firm position against the change in law, the fact that both predecessors Weman and Werkström had been at the head of the church does give them a large amount of authority.

Media responses to the “PM” initiative

Religious opposition to same-sex marriage had to voice its opinions in the face of a vast majority of Swedes in favor of same-sex marriage (71% in 2006 according to Eurobarometer), and the anticipation of sufficient political support in Parliament. The well-organized campaign, however, urged the proponents of same-sex marriage to come with a clear(er) definition of their views on marriage and its relation to sexual orientation and religion. Responses to PM came in two main waves: the first was when the campaign was launched, the second when PM held a public poster action.

On most occasions, the initiative was made ridiculous in Swedish media. PM supporters were described as “religious extremists” who had formed an “unholy alliance”,⁴⁰ “weirdoes who still believe we live in the Middle Ages”,⁴¹ a collective of “little evil pious men”⁴² and a group whose arguments would “send chills down your spine”.⁴³ Several journalists argued that PM was simply to be ignored: “If people want to have Yahweh-certified biological sex, just let them”, states one,⁴⁴ “I am fundamentally uninterested in “analyses of society” which are based on dogmatic religion”, states another.⁴⁵ Still others met the campaign with mockery: if they really wanted to “protect marriage”, it was suggested, PM supporters should have argued for the penalization of divorce.⁴⁶ What is striking about these responses, is that they attack PM supporters mostly for being religious extremists, while in fact PM itself

had avoided religious argumentation throughout its campaign. RFSL, took another tour: that of equal rights and protection against discrimination. RFSL spokespersons called the campaign “distasteful and shocking”⁴⁷ and interpreted it as “the right of the masses to suppress minority groups”,⁴⁸ which would strengthen heteronormativity and lead to violence and oppression.⁴⁹ It cannot be denied that with 50,000 signatures on a population of seven million PM, though the actual support might have been more extensive than the amount of signatures suggests, can hardly be described as a “mass” movement in society, which makes RFSL’s argumentation sound somewhat exaggerated and outdated.

Responses to PM published in national and local newspapers did, however, try to grapple with the content of the argumentation, and tried to come to other definitions of marriage and its relation to raising children. In present-day Swedish society, it is claimed, marriage and procreation no longer “naturally” fit together.⁵⁰ Rainbow families are already a reality, whether the parents are married or not, and have proven not to be harmful for children.⁵¹ Others question the “long historical roots” of marriage, pointing to the fact that as a ceremony it was not part of Swedish culture until after the Middle Ages, and state that at that time it was mainly a patriarchal institution which secured men’s ownership and power over women.⁵² In opposition to this traditional version of marriage, many of the arguments are reminiscent of Linda Woodhead’s observation on the role of intuition and the prevalence of authenticity after the “subjective turn”. Proponents of same-sex marriage paint a picture of marriage as “by nature” inclusive,⁵³ a choice people make because they love each other and to which sexual orientation is irrelevant.⁵⁴ What is basic to them is not the regulatory function of marriage as a juridical and social institution, but its symbolic function as the sanctioning of personal feelings and belonging.

Protecting marriage in public space

The debate got a new dimension when PM put up posters with a heart and arrow and the text “Marriage: mom, dad, child” all over Stockholm’s subway stations in October 2007. At that time, Hans Regner’s report on the introduction of same-sex marriage had been presented, but the government had not yet voted on the issue (they would do so in October 2009). Up until then, the campaign had been limited to advertisements in national newspapers and public statements on television and radio by its initiators, and in that sense could be ignored if one wished to. The poster campaign would bring the arguments of PM once again in the spotlight as journalists and opinion makers, in their fervor to oppose the posters, would pay a visit to the PM website in order to understand the underlying motivation. Precisely the fact that the posters gave only very little information lead to speculation about the campaigners’ motives. As one letter to the editor (written by someone who wished to stay anonymous “for reasons of homophobia”) states:

Under the heading about homophobia [on the website of Protect Marriage] they say among other things that one should look at what is best for the children and that is supposed to be an argument for the fact that marriage only concerns woman plus man. This stale argument is supported neither by law nor by relevant research, but only by the frequently occurring (I am not judging everyone) inability of conservative, moss-overgrown [*mossbeväxta*] people to accept that there are other convictions besides their own. The Christian newspaper *Dagen* is referring to these posters as an advertisement for marriage. There is obviously more to it, and it has nothing to do with love.⁵⁵

This suspicion toward the campaigners' motives is shared by others:

To express one's opinion freely and without fear is one of the benefits of a democracy. But to hide one's prejudices and rigidity behind sweet slogans, like the *Svenska Evangeliska Allians* (SEA), is something completely different.⁵⁶

What these authors share, then, is a suspicion toward the "true" motivations of the PM campaign. The suspicion might indeed be raised by the brief text on the posters, but of course everyone who wished could look up PM's motivation on the website. Even the information given there, however, was mistrusted. Perhaps people sensed that the explicitly religious motivation, which was still a substantial part of the book "Defend Marriage" but had now completely vanished from the debate, still formed part of PM's "interpretative package". One might wonder why it was so important for many respondents in the debate that PM was clear about its religious considerations. Why was it impossible for people to merely deal with the argumentation that was presented? In other words, PM was not trying to "win" the debate by posing strong religious argumentation, but rather by trying to resonate with ideas already present in mainstream Swedish culture, such as the care for children.

As the campaign was clearly situated in public space, so were some of the responses. A Facebook page called "Do Not Protect Marriage at the Subway Station" was launched and liked by many. Some journalists suggested their readers that they should "creatively alter" the posters with a marker.⁵⁷ "Protect us from their homophobia in the subway!", others requested.⁵⁸ SL, Stockholm's public transportation company, refused to take down the posters, but before long most of them had been removed by angry citizens. Moreover, shortly after the poster campaign the PM website was shut down by a hacker, leading campaign leader Stefan Gustavsson to state that "we are surprised over the fact that an advertisement campaign which emphasizes the present legislation in Sweden – that marriage only applies to the union between husband and wife – is met with such undemocratic means".⁵⁹

Same-sex marriage, religion and Swedish identity

Taking into account the fact that the introduction of same-sex marriage in Sweden was already a foregone case when PM launched its campaign, one wonders what could have been at stake in this debate besides the preservation of marriage for opposite-sex couples. One of these stakes might have been the struggle for representation of conservative religion in Swedish public debate and public space. The Church of Sweden had left this space open. It had moved toward a more liberal attitude and decided to introduce the blessing of same-sex unions. It had to make this decision as an institution, and once it was made, conservative members and clergy had no other options but to comply or, as some did, convert to Catholicism or join an Evangelical denomination. PM filled the vacuum that originated when the Church of Sweden moved to a more progressive stance. The free churches also had more to lose. As the majority could not accept same-sex marriage, the risk of losing their right to solemnize marriage at all was definitely at stake, and this shows from the argumentation of PM. (As it turned out, the free churches were not forced to perform same-sex marriages, and neither was their *vigselrätt* taken from them.)

The responses to PM in the media show the uneasiness of the greater public confronted with this firm stance taken by conservative religious representatives. PM hindered the smooth introduction of what most Swedes seemed to regard as only a logical next step in the emancipation of gays and lesbians. Though PM did not present its argumentation in religious terms, this was neglected by the press and the initiative was immediately labeled as a fundamentalist form of religion – the “wrong kind” of religion in Sweden. When PM physically claimed a part of the public space by putting up posters, reactions became even more fierce.

PM, in the meantime, could comfortably surf the waves of protest. They managed to use the forceful protest of RFSL for their own purpose. Not gays and lesbians, but conservative Christians became an oppressed minority. When their posters were torn down, when their website was hacked and when they received threatening phone calls, PM asked: what happened to democracy and freedom of speech in Sweden? Staying clear of the Bible and a direct condemnation of homosexuality (with the exception of the occasional “letter to the editor” from a Romans 1:27 quoting local pastor who had not quite grasped the strategy), PM spokespersons could piece by piece construct conservative religion as a minority position. In Sweden being a socially recognized minority is, paradoxically, a powerful position. It involves privileges, people are afraid to exclude minority perspectives, and legislation is likely to be developed to secure a minority group’s needs and rights. As such, it is a desired social position. During the debate, RFSL had to stand by and watch how its up until then unchallenged minority position came under threat, until finally, at the time of “poster-gate”, the media started to do some self-reflection and wondered why responses to PM had been so unusually sharp.

The main question of the debate seems to be: is the acceptance of *sexual* diversity the main feature of Swedish national identity or the acceptance of *religious* diversity? Up until the debate on same-sex marriage, Swedes were never forced to choose between either of the two. Only in the face of well-pronounced conservative opposition did this question present itself, as did the paradox that conservative religion challenged the very basis of Swedish values (democracy, freedom of speech, equality) upon which once the protection of lesbians and gays as a social minority was based. One could say that this indicates that the tables in Sweden are turned. Whereas once lesbians and gays may have been a minority that was indeed, as RFSL argued, oppressed by the masses, it is now conservative religious people who may have the strongest case to claim this space. Evangelical Christianity has been a familiar “other” to the Lutheran majority in Swedish society ever since it found its way to Sweden in the mid-nineteenth century. With the debate on same-sex marriage, however, this “other” got a distinct conservative face and politics to which Swedish media did not immediately have an adequate response. After the “liberalization” of the Church of Sweden, religious conservatism now seems to be in the hands of the free churches who showed a remarkable self-confidence in expressing their views and who sought the public arena much more purposefully than perhaps the Church of Sweden would. The question rises what the implications of this small earthquake in the Swedish religious landscape might be for the future. In many countries, same-sex marriage is seen as the “end station” of lesbian and gay emancipation. Hekma and Duyvendak, discussing gay and lesbian emancipation in the Netherlands, speak, for instance, of the feeling of same-sex marriage as the “pinnacle of erotic freedoms”.⁶⁰ PM might have won the struggle over public recognition in this debate, but can other debates be imagined which offer the same opportunity for the profiling of traditional religious views? Or,

perhaps more interesting: can there be a space for religious conservatism in Sweden which does not have to be negotiated through polarized debate?

Notes

1. In many countries, the opening up of marriage for same-sex couples was not done by explicitly mentioning this possibility in the law, but by making marriage legislation gender neutral. However, since in common language terms like “same-sex marriage” or “gay marriage” have become much more common, I will mostly use these terms to refer to a marriage between couples of the same sex, with a preference for same-sex marriage since it includes also lesbian couples.
2. Paternotte and Kollman, “Regulating Intimate Relationships,” 514.
3. Platero, “Love and the State.”
4. Casanova, *Public Religions*.
5. Woodhead, “Sex and Secularization,” 239.
6. Ibid., 230.
7. Young, *Religion, Sex and Politics*, 123.
8. Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere.”
9. The asterisk in “trans*” is used to include not just trans men and trans women, but all non-normative gender identities.
10. Dahl, “Queer in the Nordic Region,” 145.
11. Kulick, *Queersverige*.
12. Rydström, *Odd Couples*.
13. Demerath, “Rise of Cultural Religion,” 136.
14. Davie, “Europe an Exceptional Case?” 248–9.
15. Bäckström et al., “Religiös Förändring”; Jänterä-Jareborg, “Religion and Secular State.”
16. Claesson, “Svenska Kyrkan.”
17. Fagerberg, *De Homosexuella och Kyrkan*.
18. Rydström, *Odd Couples*, 134.
19. *Kyrkan och Homosexualiteten*. Svenska Kyrkans Utredningar no. 8, 1994.
20. Regner, *Äktenskap för Par med Samma Kön*, 17.
21. Kalin, Yngve. “Prästdeklarationen,” Homepage Yngve Kalin, <http://kalin.nu/deklaration.htm>, posted November 1, 2005.
22. Borevi, “Religiösa Friskolor,” 379–81.
23. Axner, *Public Religions*.
24. Djurfeldt, *Försvara Äktenskapet*.
25. Smith and Windes, “The Progay.”
26. Gamson and Modigliani, “Media Discourse.”
27. Ibid., 2.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 3.
30. Ibid., 4.
31. Ibid., 4–5.
32. Ibid., 6.
33. Hedin, “Detta Är Årets Viktigaste Opinionsbok!”
34. Djurfeldt, “Försvara Äktenskapet,” 11.
35. *Bevara äktenskapet, en man & en kvinna*. Leaflet published by Svenska Evangeliska Alliansen, 2006.
36. Ibid., 2.
37. Ibid.
38. Axner, *Public Religions*.
39. *Bevara äktenskapet*, 3.
40. Martin Halldin, “Homofober i (O)Helig Alians,” *Dagens ETC*, October 26, 2007, 6.

41. Ulrika Waaranperä, "SL och Homofob Reklam," *Offensiv*, October 25, 2007, 10.
42. Anna Larsson, "Världen Är Full av Små Onda Fromma Män," *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 11, 2007, 25.
43. Lina Nordquist, "Tvetydigt Tal om Enkönade Äktenskap," *Upsala Nya Tidning*, October 31, 2007, 5.
44. Maria Rydhagen, "Snälla, Hur Orkar Ni Bry Er?" *Kvällsposten*, October 26, 2007, 34.
45. Marie Carlsson, "Tyck Vad Du Vill Men Skräm Inte Hästerna," *Motala Tidning*, November 9, 2007, 32.
46. Niklas Berggren, "Förvirrande Kampanj om Äktenskap," *Dagens nyheter*, October 27, 2007, 42.
47. Jerry Adbo, cited in Eric Tagesson, "Osmakligt," *Aftonbladet*, May 6, 2007, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article11278861.ab>.
48. Sören Andersson, cited in Johanna Melén, "Kändisar i Upprop mot Homovigslar i Kyrkan," *Aftonbladet*, March 3, 2006, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article10778133.ab>.
49. Editorial, "Mama + Papa = Barn," *Motdrag*, November 13, 2007, 7.
50. Lina Nordquist, "Barnens Bästa ett Svepskäl för Traditionella Äktenskap," *Upsala Nya Tidning*, November 6, 2007, 5.
51. See note 44 above.
52. Erika Wiman, "Unken Kampanj Vill Konservera Kärnfamiljen," *Bärgslagsbladet*, November 1, 2007, 12.
53. Cecilia Dalman Eek, "Giftemål Är Kärlek Mellan Två Personer," *Ny Tid*, October 29, 2007, 2.
54. Marie Möller, "Bevara Kärleken!" *Borås Tidning*, October 31, 2007, 26.
55. Anonymous, "Kärlekslös Kampanj," *Barometern*, October 30, 2007, 30.
56. See note 42 above.
57. Katrina Bivald, "Vi Kan Förbättra Budskapet – Med Humor och Tuschpenna," *Aftonbladet*, October 26, 2007, 41.
58. See note 40 above.
59. Stefan Gustavsson, quoted in "Hackerattack mot Kritiserad Kampanj," *Enköpings-Posten*, October 25, 2007, 27.
60. Hekma and Duyvendak, "Queer Netherlands," 625.

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